

Government of the People for the People

An ideal situation for the study of municipal government and popular participation in politics is one in which the people involved are not able to enter or leave a certain locality. Interests in issues other than local or indirectly affecting local matters are at a minimum. Outside pressures and pressure groups are almost entirely absent. In other words, that community need not look farther than its own interests in the operation of its particular brand of politics. Such closed communities erupted into existence when, under the auspices of the federal government, Relocation Centers were created to house approximately 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry. Each Center had peak populations of 10,000 or 20,000, depending on location. Manzanar Relocation Center, near Death Valley, California, was one which had a total population approaching 10,000. All references to Center life and politics will deal with that community unless otherwise noted.

There is no necessity to delve into the early history or the reasons for the establishment of Relocation Centers. It is enough to say that ten thousand persons from various parts of the Pacific coast, from both rural and urban areas, were thrust into a newly-created, artificially-bound area in the middle of nowhere. Community organization was absent and had to be established almost overnight.

From the inception of center life, the people within the boundaries of the mile square community were divided into two separate and very distinct groups. One, composed of the War Relocation Authority bureaucracy, was called the Caucasian (or "Hakujin") personnel, or more euphemistically, the Appointed Personnel, or Administration.

This group included such persons as administrators, educators, recreation directors, social workers, doctors, nurses, and others whose occupations were not so easily delineated. The other, composed of persons of Japanese ancestry (or "Nihonjin"), the evacuees or inmates, was designated by the dignified term of Residents. It is rather apparent which group ~~carried~~ favored and sought to please which other group. Any elite-mass relationship was not mentioned; nevertheless, the feeling and outward manifestations were omnipresent.

Any political or other organization formed by or for the Residents was subject to the approval and rule of the Appointed Personnel, and more particularly the Project Director who reigned supreme except for rulings from Washington, D. C. Thus, it is to be seen that any political endeavor on the part of the Residents was merely a voice of the people either to be listened to or ignored by the Project Director. However, generally speaking, in order to preserve a semblance of justice and democratic institutions as well as peace and order, the Residents' organization was able to make complaints and have certain claims satisfied.

The organizational system of the Residents self-government followed natural boundaries and was very much like a precinct-ward scheme. Families were housed in single-storied barracks, three to four families per barrack. Fourteen barracks in addition to latrine-shower barracks, a mess halls, a laundry barrack (filled with wash tubs) and a bare recreation hall comprised one block.¹. In all, there were thirty-six

1. See accompanying diagram of a typical block.

such blocks. Each block elected its own Block Manager. These men when assembled became the Block Managers' Council. The Chairman of the Council, elected by the members, became the voice of the Residents.

The Block Managers' Council with its chairman acted in the main as buffers or intermediaries between the Appointed Personnel and the Residents. Thus, fairly capable handling of both the English and Japanese languages was a necessary prerequisites for the office of Block Manager. Here, it is necessary to digress a bit in order to explain the composition of the Resident population. Three main groups were present. First, there was the group of Japanese born in Japan (automatically ineligible to United States citizenship) who came to America at about the turn of the century and in the early 1900's. They are known as Issei. Secondly, there was the group of young people born to the Issei in the United States. These natural born American citizens are known as Nisei. Thirdly, there was a group of Nisei sent to Japan at an early age to study. Many of this group, the Nisei-Kibei, or Kibei, spoke Japanese much more fluently than English and had more sympathies with Japan and Japanese customs than did their brother Nisei.

Of the many reasons why Nisei participation in Block Manager politics was negligible compared to that of Issei and Kibei; there were two obvious points not to be overlooked. The Nisei as a group was young in years, and was not particularly articulate in Japanese. Since there were no citizenship bars to the holding of Block Manager posts, the Issei were eligible for office and almost completely dominated the scene. The Kibei generally followed the lead of their elders.

At the first semi-annual election of Block Managers, residents did not know each other, and the specific duties of Block Managers were not known. A few days prior to the date set as election day block meetings were held in each of the thirty-six blocks. Subsequent to elaborate nomination speeches by friends, candidates were chosen viva voce. Men formerly prominent in business circles (i.e., farm produce brokers, restaurant owners, department store owners, retail produce market operators, etc.) were known to many by name. These men became candidates not because they were particularly adept at political machination but because they had accumulated some money on the West Coast the hard way--honest work for some and shady dealings for others. Other men became candidates for office because they were most vociferous and colorful in their outcries against the intangible "government" for their unjustified and miserable incarceration. Still others, unfortunately a minority, entered the electoral picture in order to try to help the Residents and to ameliorate the relationship between the Administration and the Residents. Women were conspicuously absent and when present, silent. The only exception were the young Nisei women, but the older folks paid them very little heed. Segments of the old country cultural patterns lying dormant for decades sprang to the fore: Women are to be seen, if necessary, but not heard. Young people should listen to and bow to the wisdom and experience of their elders.

Elections were held in each block. Persons receiving the highest number of votes became Block Managers and those receiving the next highest became Assistant. There were no complicated methods of casting votes (the secret ballot system was used), tabulating votes, or interpreting results. Voting was a new experience for the majority and

people were too naive even to attempt fraud. There was no violence or excessive pressures put upon voters. Anyone eighteen years or over was allowed to vote although office seekers had to be at least twenty-one.

Because the Nisei were not well represented on the Block Managers' Council, many of the Blocks under the leadership of thinking, college and university trained Nisei formed Nisei Councils, democratically organized pressure groups. Unfortunately, the Nisei Councils were weak because of the indifferences~~X~~ of the young people who were more interested in inter~~and~~ and intra-block athletic contests, the latest swing records, the ping pong tournaments, and the like. Many were disappointed at the apparent failure of the United States Constitution and "due process of law" to halt the evacuation proceedings which uprooted them from their pre-Pearl Harbor ways of living. "After all," they said, "how could democratic institutions flourish behind barbed wire fences and armed U.S. Army M.P.'s?"²

In the beginning many people looked to the Block Managers' Council with hope--hope that their wishes would be conveyed to the Administration. They thought that changes in administrative procedures, rates

2. The following paragraph from page 104 of Alexander H. Leighton's book, The Governing of Men, describes this attitude.

use single spacing →
"Talk about democracy and making Poston (an Arizona Relocation Center) a democratic community was particularly resented by the Nisei who looked on evacuation and their detention in the camp as a violation of their citizenship rights indistinguishable from Fascism. To speak to people in their position about democratic principles seemed a mockery and they were too close to their misery and anger to have any perspective concerning it. It is probable, too, that members of the Administration ineptly overemphasized democracy in their talks to the evacuees because they were defensively anxious to prove that in spite of what had happened, democratic principles existed, and would operate, somehow."

of pay,³ housing facilities, methods of leaving the Center areas, etc. could be instituted. They were disappointed. Many orders filtered through the Council to the Residents from the Administration but few traveled the reverse route. Interest in the Block Manager system dwindled and eventually reference to the Managers as flunkies and messenger boys were rife.

According to Alexander H. Leighton,⁴ the duties of Council members in Poston Relocation Center, Arizona, were:

"1. To cooperate with the Project staff in securing the participation of all the residents.

"2. To apply all administrative regulations and policies in the blocks.

"3. To make reports to the Project Director and his staff on the functioning of the community services of the Administration." Block Managers performed or tried to perform the same functions and in addition distributed shoe ration coupons, soap (made in the center), toilet tissues, and various other sundries. Politically, they did little except to register grievance and present them at Council meetings. Primarily, though not ~~be~~ intention, they became scapegoats upon whom irate Residents vented their rage both in private and in public.

3. In addition to food, housing, medical care, and a small monthly allowance for clothing which were available to all residents, the workers received monthly paychecks for their labors. The rates were nineteen dollars for professional and supervisory positions, sixteen dollars for skilled and unskilled positions, and twelve dollars for unskilled and apprentice positions. Each work week consisted of forty-four hours and no pay was made for overtime work. The majority of the workers in the Center fell into the middle category and drew sixteen dollars per months.

4. Pp. 110-111, Leighton, Alexander H.: The Governing of Men, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey (1945).

Many Residents felt it unwise and a bit foolhardy to damn the administration in public. An escape valve for pent-up emotion was made possible by the presence of the Block Managers, or Block Heads as they were sometimes called.

General attitudes and sentiments against Block Managers and working against active participation in Center politics in addition to the indifference found in other not so unique communities may be classified into four categories not necessarily in order of importance.

1. There was widespread speculation that Block Managers were informers, a type of "fifth column" working for the Administration and against the Residents. This sentiment, of course, inspired little confidence in the Managers.

2. Any member of the Resident population and any political position held by a Resident was considered impotent in righting wrongs committed by the Administration. There was a feeling that the Administration fostered certain democratic-looking features such as cooperatively owned stores and shops to make more palatable the bitter pill of deprivation of rights.

3. As mentioned above, Block Managers became scapegoats and targets of abuse. The posts were not attractive and were not held in high esteem by the Residents. This psychological projection of wrath from the Administration to the Block Managers indicates to a certain degree the relationship between the Appointed Personnel and the Residents.

4. The widespread feeling of apathy served to suffocate popular participation in Center politics. Families had been uprooted from their accustomed ways of life, entire daily routines had to be revised, and above all, the family picture was drastically changed--the father

was no longer the ^{BR}head winner, the mother had very little housework to do, food was served in hodge-podge fashion at mess halls where approximately two hundred people ate at one time, and children ran about in unsupervised play. There was ample time for brooding and a man's neighbor very likely was not one to argue when discussion shifted to the unfortunate circumstance that "I was born with a Japanese face."

Because of the various stresses present in the Resident population, because of the lack of precedence in the administration of Relocation Centers, and because of the lack of properly trained and equipped personnel, government in the Manzanar Relocation Center developed to be government of the people, for the people, but not by the people. All of the opportunities for self-government were not exploited to their fullest, and the end result was an ugly display of temperment and individual selfishness, but not an indictment against the success of survival of democratic ideals and institutions in the midst of extreme ^{4Y}extenuating circumstances.